VALPARAISO CRESSET (IN)
May 1985

THE CIA RECONSIDERED

Why Covert Activities Are Sometimes Necessary

Albert R. Trost

The Central Intelligence Agency is not a popular institution. The outcry over involvement with the "contras" in Nicaragua is only the most current manifestation of this. The CIA may be slightly more popular than it was in the mid-1970s, since I probably would not have dared to write this article then, fearing the remonstrances of friends. By definition the CIA only gets negative press. It gets our attention when it exceeds the limits of its authority and someone who knows about it, typically a disenchanted employee, tells us so. Officially, the CIA cannot tell us what it does, good or bad. As we know, "the Central Intelligence Agency does not confirm or deny published reports, whether true, false, favorable, or unfavorable to the Agency or its personnel. The CIA does not publicly discuss its organization, its budget, or its personnel." The above is the stated public relations and press policy of the Agency.

If the older among the readers of this article think that news about the CIA is a recent phenomenon, they are right. The United States did not really have an organization like the CIA until the Second World War. The war-time organization, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), had an almost heroic image helping in the fight against fascism. However, we heard little about it until it was disbanded. Its successor, the CIA, was created in 1947 by the National Security Act, a law which pretty much defined our entire present-day national security apparatus, including the Department of Defense.

Even then, we still did not hear much about the Central Intelligence Agency. It was not until the mid-1960s when a few cautious books began to appear that it came strongly to our attention. Since that time the Agency has frequently been the object of public scrutiny.

There are times when it almost fades from sight, but at other times, as in the late 1960s in Vietnam, the mid-1970s in the Watergate scandal and domestic spying incidents, and most recently in Central America the initials "CIA" are before us daily in the news. These latter times have in common a tactical mistake, some clear exceeding of CIA authority, and someone on the inside "blowing the whistle." Negative image-building has become the full-time occupation of some former "insiders" like Philip Agee. In the Third World and the Socialist bloc negative comments about the CIA are even more plentiful, sometimes when it is not even around; it has become a generalized symbol of American intervention in other countries. Since the CIA is not going to rise publicly to its own defense, can anything be said on its behalf?

Critics wonder whether we even need the Agency since, with the exception of an occasional spy or dabbling in military field intelligence, we got along without anything like it until the Second World War. Yet there can be no doubt that the United States requires good intelligence information. We could get along without it in the past only because we were not much involved with the world beyond our borders. Where we did get involved, such as in our own hemisphere, our involvement was so one-sided and heavy-handed that intelligence was not considered necessary. We were not a major participant in Europe, where we would have met more of our military match and been under more threat. The Europeans developed intelligence bureaucracies before us. It was not until the rise of fascism and then Marxism-Leninism that Americans began to perceive the dedication and organization that enemy powers could possess. In this as in many other ways, the Second World War was a watershed for changing the American role in the world.

The expanded involvement of the United States in the world, the perception of a dangerous and dedicated enemy in the Soviet Union, and the responsibilities of the United States as a nuclear power made

Continued

Albert R. Trost *is Professor and Chairman of the Department of Political Science at Valparaiso University and a regular contributor to* The Cresset *on public affairs.*